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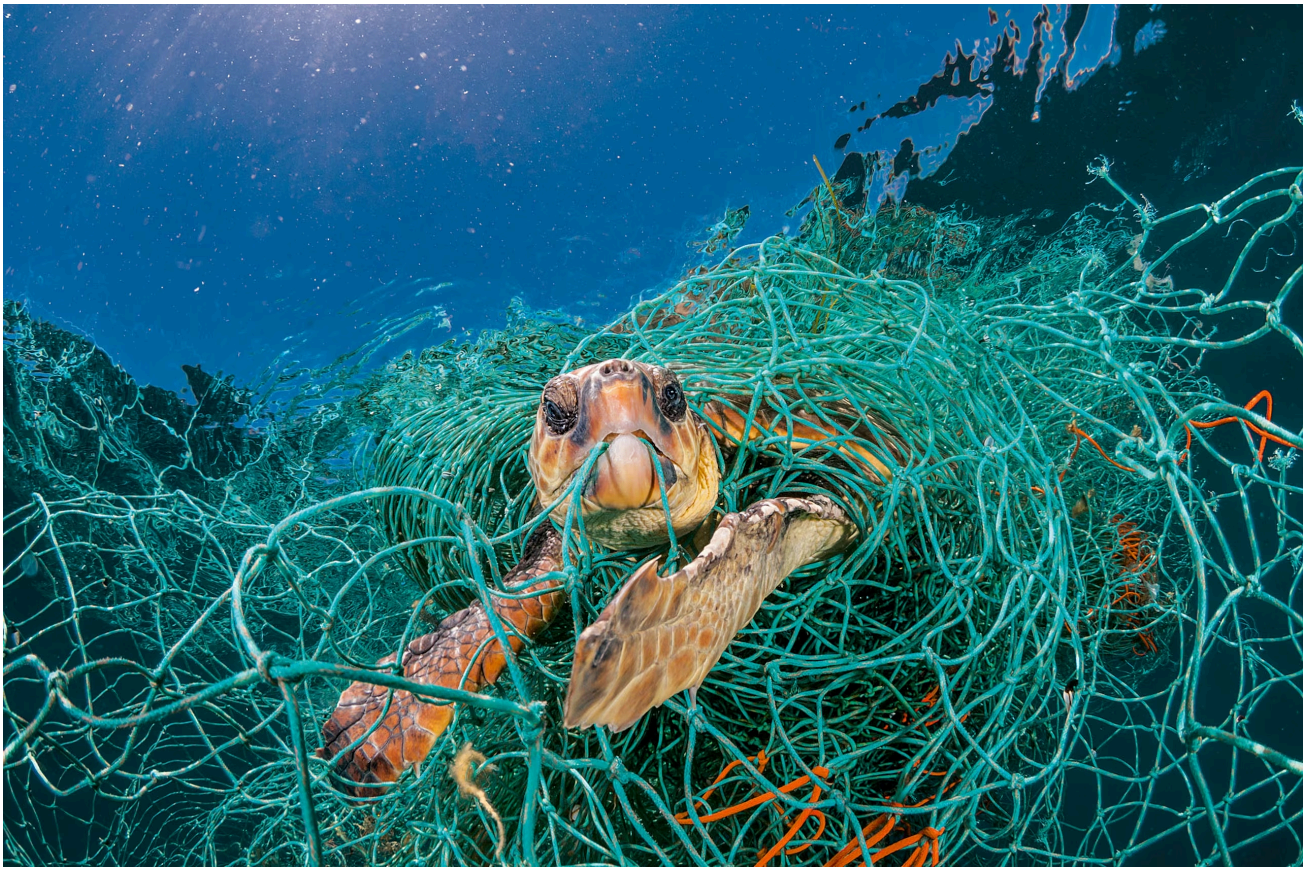


An old plastic fishing net snares a loggerhead turtle in the Mediterranean off Spain. The turtle could stretch its neck above water to breathe but would have died had the photographer not freed it. "Ghost fishing" by derelict gear is a big threat to sea turtles.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JORDI CHIAS

PREMIUM MAGAZINE PLANET OR PLASTIC?

For Animals, Plastic Is Turning the Ocean Into a Minefield

From getting stuck in nets to eating plastic that they think is food, creatures worldwide are dying from material we made.

By Natasha Daly

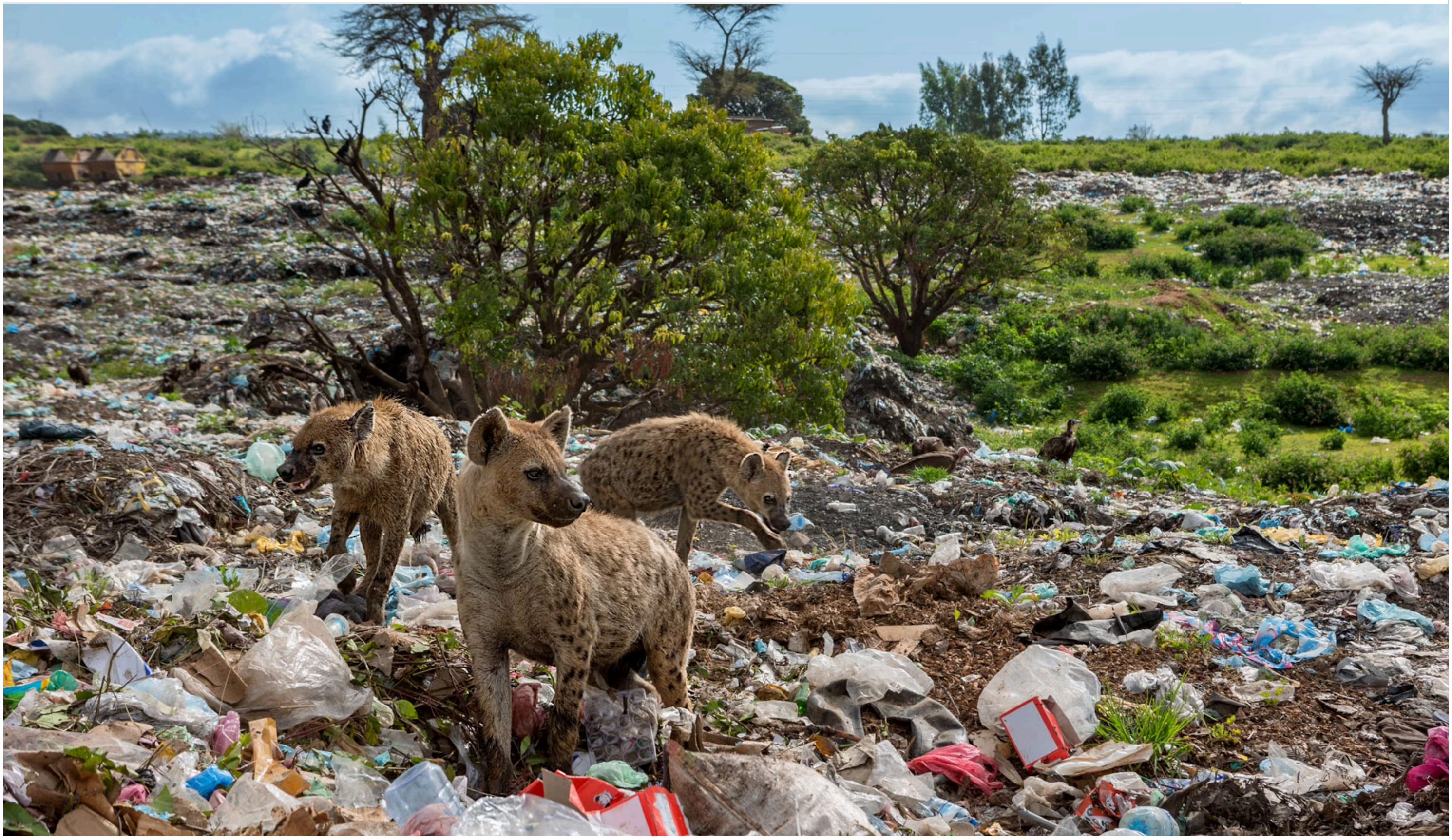
4 min read

Read this story and more in the June 2018 issue of *National Geographic* magazine.

On a boat off Costa Rica, a biologist uses pliers from a Swiss army knife to try to extract a plastic straw from a sea turtle's nostril. The turtle writhes in agony, bleeding profusely. For eight painful minutes the YouTube video ticks on; it has logged more than 20 million views, even though it's so hard to watch. At the end the increasingly desperate biologists finally manage to dislodge a four-inch-long straw from the creature's nose.

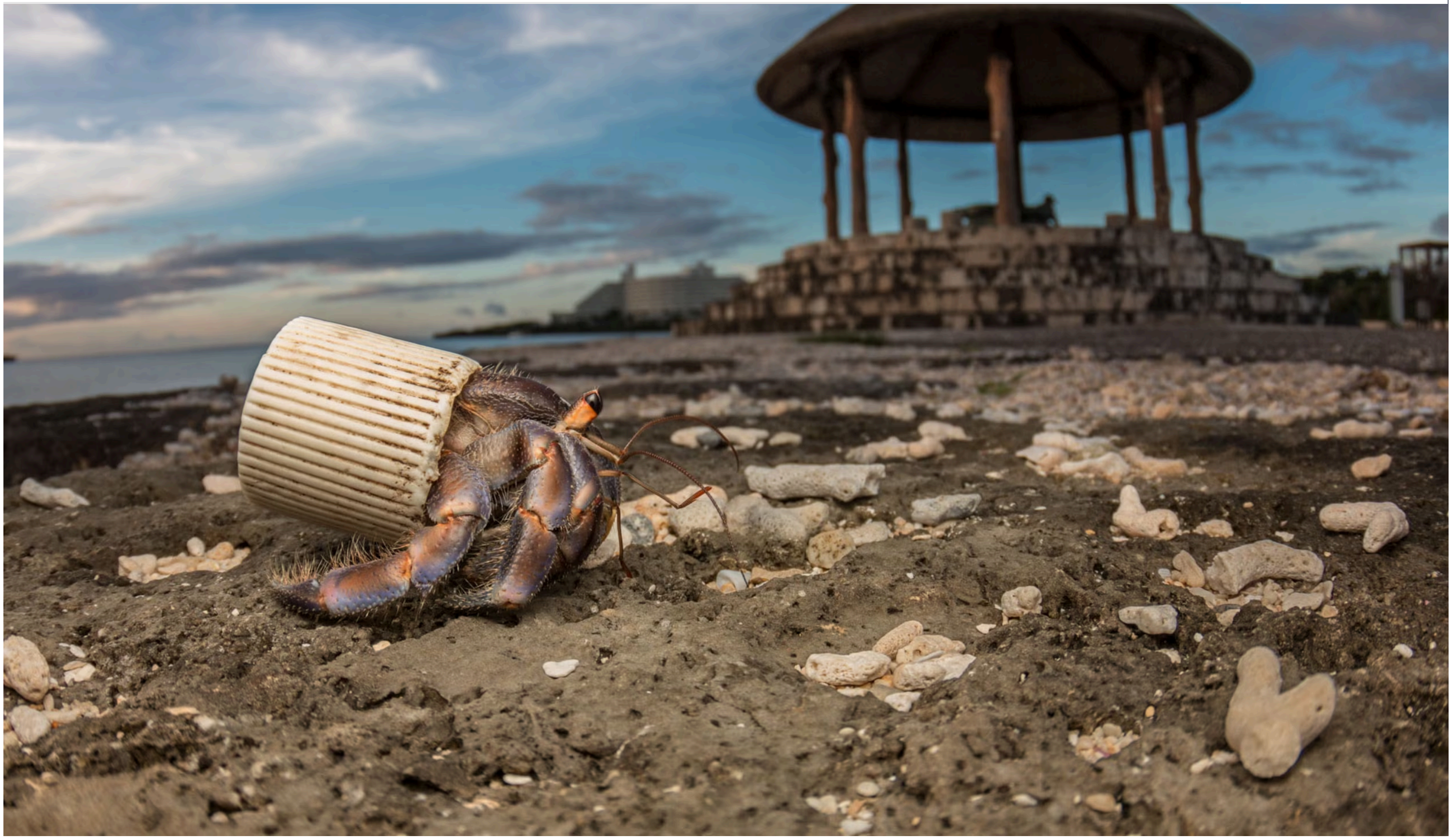
Raw scenes like this, which lay bare the toll of plastic on wildlife, have become familiar: The dead albatross, its stomach bursting with refuse. The turtle stuck in a six-pack ring, its shell warped from years of straining against the tough plastic. The seal snared in a discarded fishing net.

But most of the time, the harm is stealthier. Flesh-footed shearwaters, large, sooty brown seabirds that nest on islands off the coasts of Australia and New Zealand, eat more plastic as a proportion of their body mass than any other marine animal, researchers say: In one large population, 90 percent of the fledglings had already ingested some. A plastic shard piercing an intestine can kill a bird quickly. But typically the consumption of plastic just leads to chronic, unrelenting hunger.



Some animals now live in a world of plastics—like these hyenas scavenging at a landfill in Harar, Ethiopia. They listen for garbage trucks and find much of their food in trash.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BRIAN LEHMANN



On Okinawa, Japan, a hermit crab resorts to a plastic bottle cap to protect its soft abdomen. Beachgoers collect the shells the crabs normally use, and they leave trash behind.

PHOTOGRAPH BY SHAWN MILLER

"The really sad thing about this is that they're eating plastic thinking it's food," says Matthew Savoca, a marine biologist with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. "Imagine you ate lunch and then just felt weak and lethargic and hungry all day. That would be very confusing." Fish such as anchovies, Savoca has found, eat plastic because it smells like food once it's covered with algae. Seabirds, expending energy their malnourished bodies don't have, roam farther in search of real food, only to drag back plastic waste to feed their young.

What makes plastic useful for people—its durability and light weight—increases the threat to animals. Plastic hangs around a long time, and a lot of it floats. "Single-use plastics are the worst. Period. Bar none," Savoca says, entangled in plastic.

We don't fully understand plastic's long-term impact on wildlife (nor **its impact on us**). We haven't been using the stuff for very long. The first documented cases of seabirds ingesting plastic were 74 Laysan albatross chicks found on a Pacific atoll in 1966, when plastic production was roughly a twentieth of what it is today. In hindsight, those birds seem like the proverbial canaries in a coal mine.

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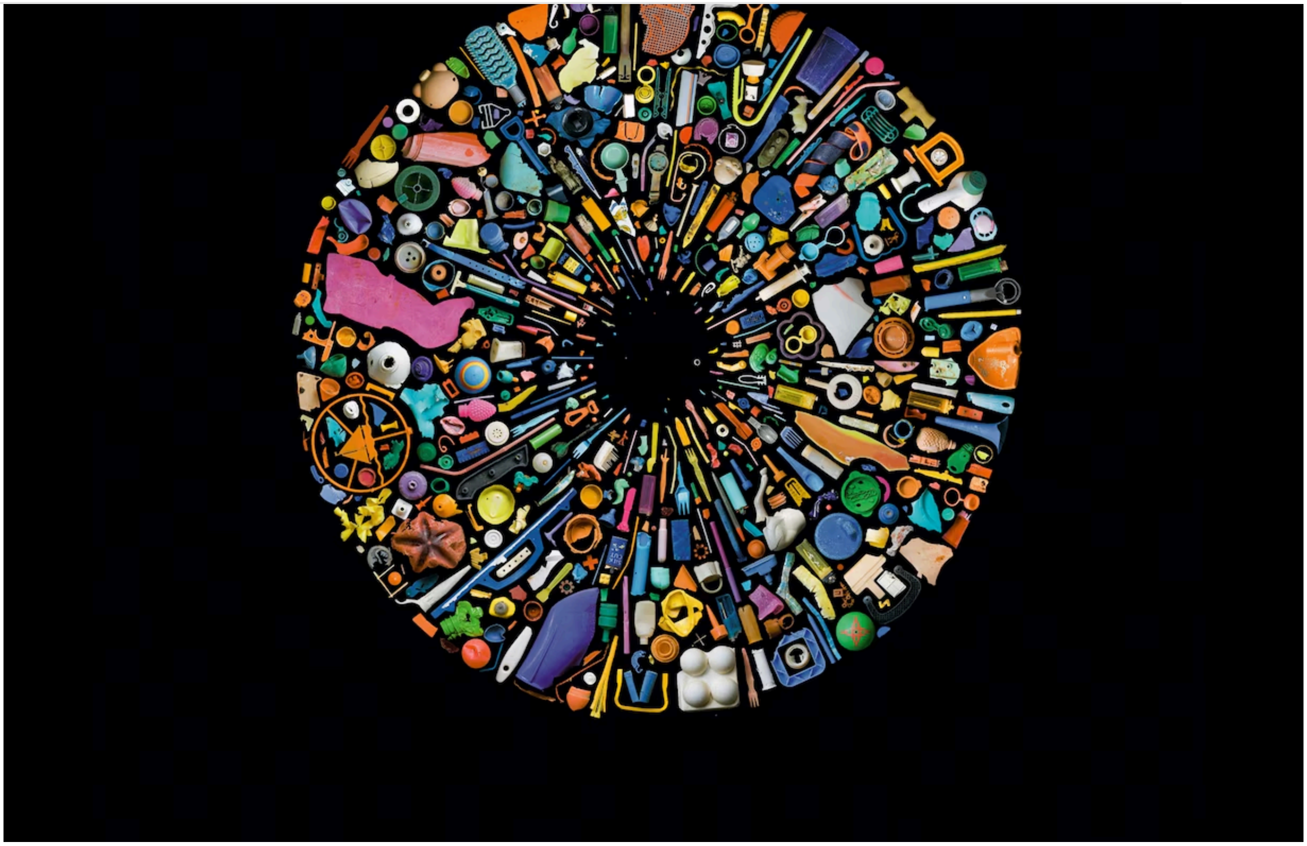

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